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The Psychological and Emotional Impact of Sudden Parental Death on Children's Grief

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CONTENT

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Result and Discussion
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ABSTRACT

Background: The sudden death of a parent is a deeply traumatic event for children, often causing significant emotional and psychological disruptions that hinder their development and academic performance. **Objective:** This study investigated the psychological and emotional impacts of sudden parental death on children. **Method:** Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected through the validated Sudden Parental Death Impact Assessment Questionnaire (SPDIQ), with high internal consistency (α = 0.85, 0.72, 0.81). SPSS v25 was used to analyze responses via descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and Pearson correlation. **Results:** Findings showed that emotional shock, isolation, fear, and suicidal thoughts were among the most reported effects, along with depression and academic decline. Moderate, statistically significant correlations existed between sudden parental death and both emotional and psychological distress. **Conclusion:** The study confirms that sudden parental death has a measurable and distressing impact on children, irrespective of the background of the supporting counselor. **Contribution:** This research contributes empirical evidence to child grief literature by quantifying the emotional and psychological effects of sudden bereavement while also challenging prevailing assumptions about counselor effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

Grief; Bereavement; Sudden parental death; Psychological impact, Emotional response

1. INTRODUCTION

Parental death is a traumatic event that disrupts a child's psychological stability, emotional development, and overall well-being. It not only introduces intense grief but also leaves the child unprepared to cope with the overwhelming emotional turmoil that follows. The suddenness of the loss deprives the child of anticipatory grief, creating a profound sense of confusion, fear, and abandonment (Boelen & Smid, 2017). Children who experience the abrupt loss of a parent are at heightened risk of developing long-term emotional and psychological issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Uche & Uche, 2025). This distress is compounded by their cognitive developmental stage, their understanding of death, and the availability of emotional support systems. When a child loses a parent suddenly through accidents, heart attacks, suicide, or violence, the impact can be seve-

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re and enduring. Unlike anticipated death, where there is often time for psychological preparation and closure, sudden parental loss often occurs in the absence of final conversations or goodbyes. This makes adjustment more difficult and grief more complicated (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021).

The lack of preparation and the unexpected nature of the death creates a psychological shock, particularly in younger children who struggle to comprehend the permanence of loss. The problem lies in the inadequacy of psychological support for bereaved children, which leaves many vulnerable to adverse developmental and emotional outcomes. There is also a lack of uniformity in school-based or clinical interventions, with many children falling through the cracks due to stigma, cultural silence around death, and a general underestimation of children's grief responses (Cicchetti et al., 2016). Research has consistently shown that the psychological response of children to the sudden loss of a parent is influenced by a variety of factors, including age, personality, coping skills, the surviving parent's mental health, and the availability of a supportive environment. Jankauskaite et al. (2021) identify grief in children as multidimensional, encompassing emotional, behavioural, and physical responses. Emotionally, bereaved children may experience sadness, guilt, anger, fear, and helplessness. Psychologically, they may develop intrusive thoughts, nightmares, or depressive symptoms. The sudden nature of the death further increases the risk of complicated grief, a persistent form of intense mourning that interferes with daily life (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021).

Younger children, particularly those under the age of 10, often do not understand the finality of death, which can lead to magical thinking or false beliefs about the deceased returning. This misunderstanding can cause regressive behaviours such as bedwetting, clinging, and difficulty concentrating (Barone, 2015). Adolescents, while more cognitively aware of death's permanence, often struggle with identity formation and emotional regulation, which can lead to substance abuse, academic decline, or withdrawal (Scott et al., 2020). The surviving parent plays a central role in shaping the child's adjustment. According to (Cui et al., 2024), children are more likely to exhibit psychological resilience if the surviving caregiver is emotionally available, maintains the structure, and models healthy grieving. However, if the surviving parent is overwhelmmmed by their grief, it may impede the child's recovery process. Thus, the psychological toll of sudden parental loss extends beyond the individual child, affecting the family unit's emotional climate (Perry et al., 2022; Arslanlı et al., 2024)

Cultural and social responses to bereavement also influence a child's psychological adjustment. In some cultures, death is shrouded in silence, and children are often excluded from funerals or discussions about the deceased. Such exclusion may exacerbate confusion and emotional detachment, depriving the child of closure and expression (Uchida et al., 2022). On the other hand, open communication and rituals that include children are beneficial in helping them process their emotions and understand the loss more constructively. Interventions that focus on grief counseling, expressive therapies (e.g., play, art, narrative therapy), and support groups have proven effective in mitigating the long-term effects of bereavement. Franck et al. (2015) emphasize trauma-informed grief interventions that not only address the loss but also help children rebuild their sense of safety, self-worth, and connection. Schools and community organizations play a vital role in early identification and referral of bereaved children to appropriate services. Without timely and appropriate intervention, children grieving a sudden parental death are at risk of enduring psychological difficulties that may extend into adulthood (Kissil, 2016; Cowdry & Stirling, 2020). The present study, therefore, is crucial for understanding the deep and often underesti-mated trauma children experience after losing a parent without warning.

Sudden parental death, whether from accidents, suicide, or acute illness, disrupts a child's sense of security, often leading to complicated grief, anxiety, depression, or behavioural issues (Aguirre et al., 2024). While previous studies, such as Fu et al. (2025), have explored children's general responses to bereavement, there remains a gap in differentiating between anticipated and sudden loss, especially in diverse cultural contexts. Keyes et al. (2014) highlight that children who experience unexpected loss are at greater risk of long-term psychological disorders. However, most grief interventions are designed for adults or focus on anticipated loss. Furthermore, limited research addresses how the surviving caregiver's coping style influences the bereaved child's emotional recovery, particularly when both are overwhelmed by the same loss. This study fills these gaps by emphasizing the need for early intervention, culturally sensitive grief support, and child-centred therapeutic approaches. It also underscores the urgent call for school and community-based systems to recognize and respond to children's unique grief trajectories after sudden parental death.

Current research affirms that sudden parental death has a profound and destabilizing effect on a child's emotional development, psychological stability, and overall mental well-being. Children who experience the unexpected loss of a parent often lack anticipatory grief, leaving them overwhelmed by confusion, fear, and unresolved emotions (Boelen & Smid, 2017). This type of loss is associated with higher risks of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and behavioural dysregulation (Uche & Uche, 2025; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021). The psychological response is shaped by several factors, including the child's

age, developmental stage, personality, available support systems, and the mental health of the surviving parent (Jankauskaite et al., 2021). Interventions such as grief counseling, expressive therapies, and trauma-informed care have shown promise in reducing long-term psychological distress (Franck et al., 2015). However, cultural silence around death, lack of consistent support systems, and exclusion of children from grief-related conversations often compound the trauma (Uchida et al., 2022). Schools and community institutions are critical for early detection and support, yet their involvement remains fragmented and inconsistent across different regions and populations.

Despite the growing literature on childhood bereavement, there remains a significant gap in differentiating the psychological consequences of sudden versus anticipated parental death, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. Many existing interventions are modelled on adult experiences of grief or are generalized across all types of loss, which may not align with the developmental and emotional needs of children experiencing abrupt and traumatic bereavement (Keyes et al., 2014; Fu et al., 2025). Moreover, the interaction between the surviving caregiver's coping ability and the child's emotional adjustment is underexplored, even though research suggests that the emotional availability of the surviving parent plays a central role in the child's resilience and recovery (Cui et al., 2024). This study addresses these gaps by focusing on child-centered, culturally responsive grief support, emphasizing the urgency for early and specialized interventions. It also highlights the necessity of integrating grief awareness into educational and community systems to ensure children do not go unnoticed or unsupported in the wake of such a profound loss.

This study aims to explore the psychological and emotional impacts of sudden parental death on children, with a specific focus on the perceptions of experienced academic and marriage counselors in Anambra State, Nigeria. By employing a descriptive survey design and the Sudden Parental Death Impact Assessment Questionnaire (SPDIQ), the research aims to identify the most prevalent emotional and psychological responses observed in bereaved children, such as emotional shock, fear, isolation, and suicidal thoughts. The study also seeks to evaluate the consistency of counsellor perspectives across varying levels of experience and qualifications, ultimately generating insights to inform the development of tailored school- and community-based grief support interventions for children coping with the trauma of sudden parental loss.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a descriptive survey design, which enabled the researcher to systematically investigate the psychological and emotional impacts of sudden parental death from the perspectives of professionals who regularly engage with bereaved children. This design was suitable for capturing rich, experience-based data from a specific professional group, offering insights into familiar patterns and challenges observed in affected children.

2.2 Participants

The research was conducted in Anambra State, Nigeria, chosen for its diverse composition of urban and rural populations and its relatively high concentration of academic and marriage counselors operating in schools and family support services. The study population consisted of counselors with direct experience in grief and child psychology. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 68 participants, each with a minimum of two years of counseling experience and prior engagement with children who had experienced the sudden loss of a parent. This purposive selection ensured the information collected was grounded in practical, professional experience.

2.3 Data Collection

The researcher developed a structured questionnaire titled the Sudden Parental Death Impact Assessment Questionnaire (SPDIQ) to collect data. This instrument was designed to assess various emotional and psychological effects typically observed in bereaved children, including trauma, anxiety, depression, behavioural withdrawal, and suicidal ideation. The questionnaire's validity was reviewed and refined by three experts from the Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counseling, and Measurement and Evaluation at Nnamdi Azikiwe University. A pilot test was conducted on a sample of ten counselors in nearby Enugu State, yielding Cronbach Alpha coefficients of 0.85, 0.72, and 0.81, which confirmed high internal consistency across the instrument's subscales. The final version of the SPDIQ was distributed electronically via an online survey platform. Ethical procedures, including informed consent, participant anonymity, and voluntary participation, were strictly followed.

2.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using quantitative methods. Questionnaire responses were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were used to summarize the central tendencies and variations in the responses. To test the relationships and group differences, inferential statistics were applied, particularly Pearson correlation to assess the strength of association between sudden parental death and psychological/emotional impacts, and ANOVA to determine whether differences in counselors' percep-

tions were statistically significant based on their years of experience or professional qualifications.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

Based on the data analysis that has been carried out, the following research results are presented by the research focus, namely as follows:

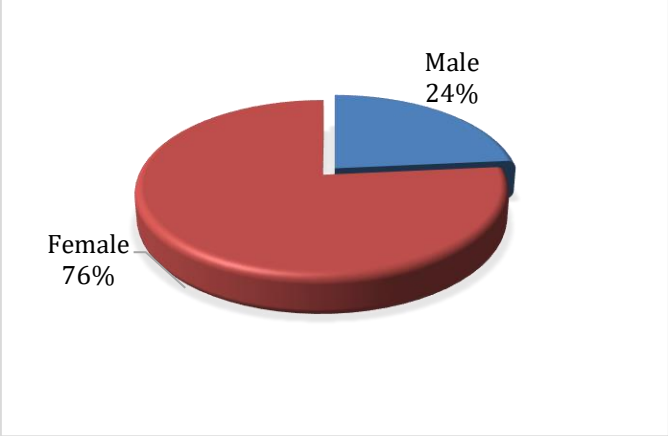

Figure 1. Distribution of Respondents by Gender

Figure 1 showed that out of the 68 respondents, a majority were female counselors (52; 76.5%), while male counselors accounted for a smaller portion (16; 23.5%). This shows a significant gender imbalance in the counseling profession within the study area, with women representing more than three-quarters of the total participants.

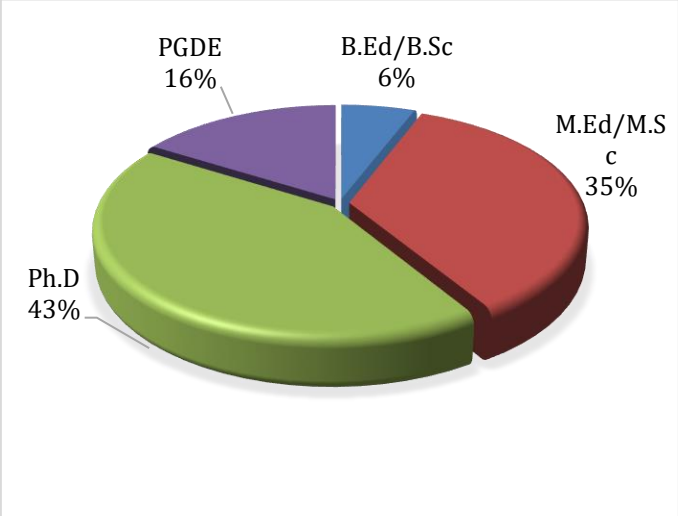

Figure 2. Distribution of Respondents by Highest Educational Qualification

Figure 1 showed that among the 68 respondents, the majority held Ph.D. degrees (29; 42.6%), followed by those with M.Ed/M.Sc. qualifications (24; 35.3%). A smaller number had PGDE (11; 16.2%), while only a few possessed B.Ed/B.Sc. degrees (4; 5.9%). This indicates a highly educated sample, with over three-quarters holding postgraduate qualifications.

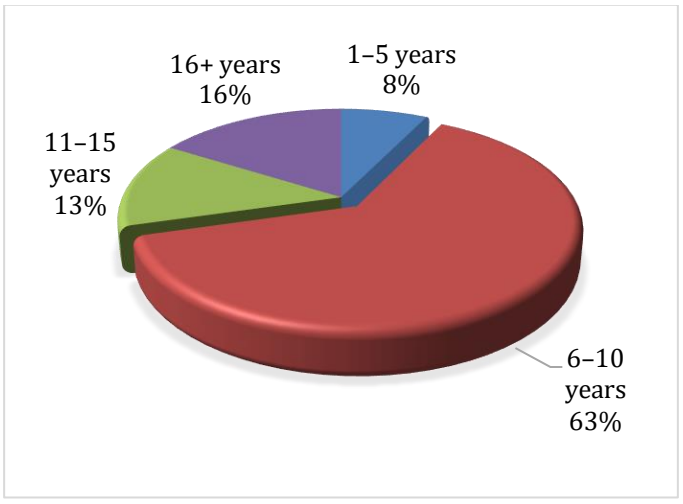

Figure 3. Distribution of Respondents by Years of Counseling Experience

Figure 3 showed that out of the 68 respondents, the majority (43; 63.2%) had between 6–10 years of counseling experience. Those with over 16 years of experience accounted for 11 (16.2%), while 9 (13.2%) had 11–15 years of experience. Only 5 (7.4%) had 1–5 years. This reflects a largely experienced respondent group.

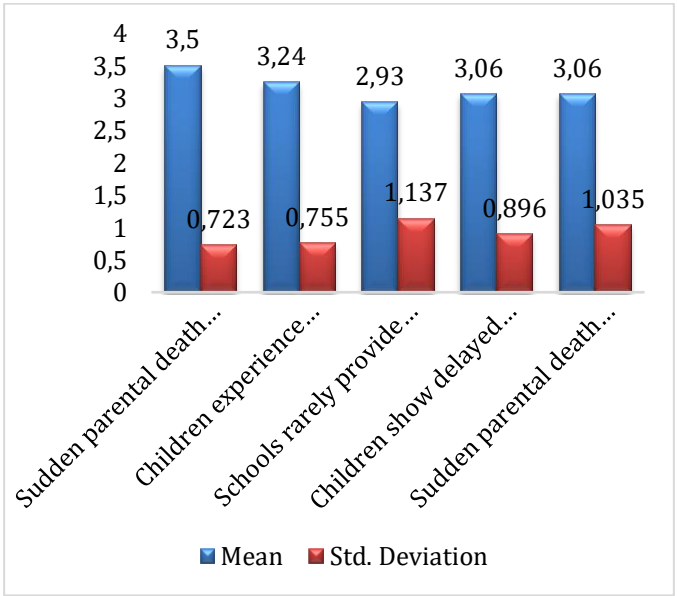

Figure 4. Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents' Opinions on the Psychological and Emotional Impact of Sudden Parental Death

Figure 4 showed that the item *"Sudden parental death causes emotional shock for most children"* had the highest

mean score (3.50; SD = 0.723), indicating strong agreement among respondents. This was followed by *"Children experience disruption in routine"* (M = 3.24; SD = 0.755). The lowest mean was for *"Schools rarely provide immediate support"* (M = 2.93; SD = 1.137), suggesting a more mixed view.

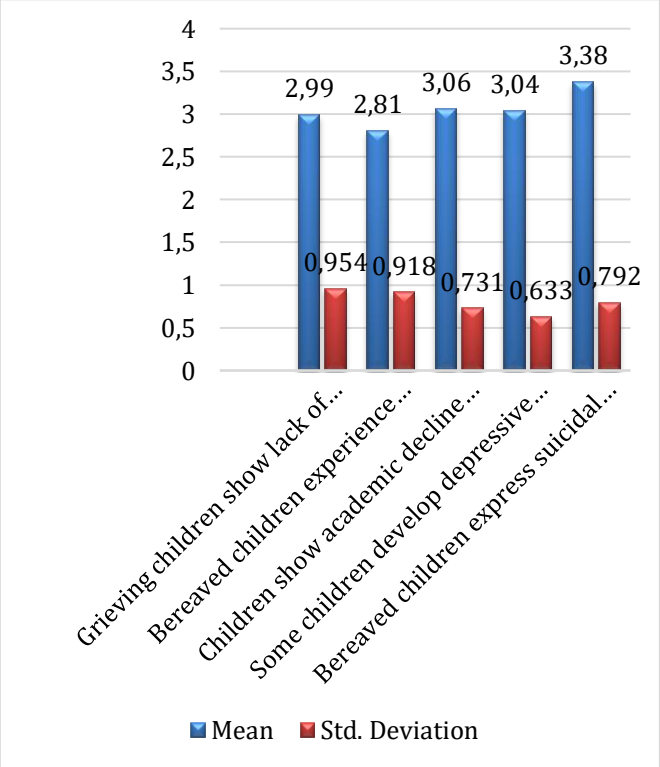

Figure 5. Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents' Opinions on the Psychological Impact of Sudden Parental Death on Children

Figure 5 showed that among the psychological impacts assessed, the statement *"Bereaved children express suicidal thoughts occasionally"* recorded the highest mean score (3.38; SD = 0.792), indicating strong concern among respondents. This was followed by *"Children show academic decline after losing a parent"* (M = 3.06; SD = 0.731) and *"Some children develop depressive symptoms"* (M = 3.04; SD = 0.633). The lowest mean score was for *"Bereaved children experience persistent anxiety"* (M = 2.81; SD = 0.918). These results suggest that counselors observed notable psychological distress and academic impact in children following sudden parental loss.

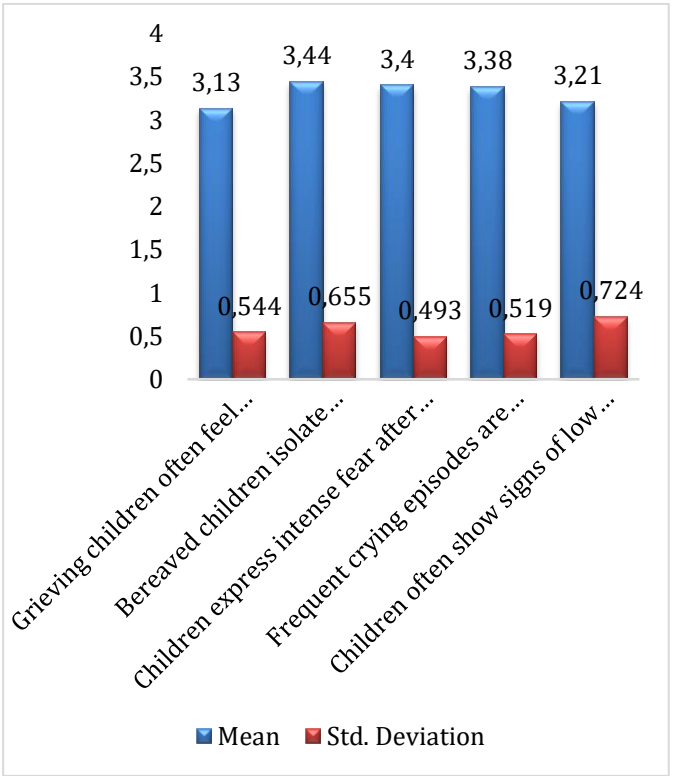

Figure 6. Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents' Opinions on the Emotional Impact of Sudden Parental Death on Children

Figure 6 showed that the highest emotional impact reported was that *"Bereaved children isolate themselves from others" with a mean score of 3.44 (SD = 0.655), closely followed by "Children express intense fear after losing a parent"* (M = 3.40; SD = 0.493). Frequent crying (M = 3.38; SD = 0.519) and feelings of abandonment (M = 3.13; SD = 0.544) were also prominent. These findings suggest that emotional withdrawal, fear, and low self-worth are significant emotional consequences of sudden parental death.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant psychological impact of sudden parental death on children's grief.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation between Sudden Parental Death and Psychological Impact on Children's Grief

				Sudden Parental Death	Psychological Impact
Sudden Parental Death	Pearson Correlation			1	.399**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.001
	N			68	68
	Bootstrap[c]	Bias		0	.002
		Std. Error		0	.110
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower	1	.163
			Upper	1	.597
	Pearson Correlation			.399**	1

				Sudden Parental Death	Psychological Impact
Psychological Impact	Sig. (2-tailed)			.001	
	N			68	68
	Bootstrap[c]	Bias		.002	0
		Std. Error		.110	0
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower	.163	1
			Upper	.597	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
c. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples

Table 1 shows a moderate, statistically significant positive correlation between sudden parental death and psychological impact on children's grief (r = .399, p = .001). This means that as experiences of sudden parental death increase, psychological distress in children tends to rise. Given that the p-value (.001) is less than 0.01, the null hypothesis is **rejected.** Therefore, sudden parental death significantly affects the psychological well-being of grieving children.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant emotional impact of sudden parental death on children's grief.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation between Sudden Parental Death and Emotional Impact on Children's Grief

				Sudden Parental Death	Emotional Impact
Sudden Parental Death	Pearson Correlation			1	.382**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.001
	N			68	68
	Bootstrap[c]	Bias		0	-.003
		Std. Error		0	.091
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower	1	.189
			Upper	1	.545
Emotional Impact	Pearson Correlation			.382**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.001	
	N			68	68
	Bootstrap[c]	Bias		-.003	0
		Std. Error		.091	0
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower	.189	1
			Upper	.545	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
c. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples

Table 2 indicates a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between sudden parental death and emotional impact on children's grief (r = .382, p = .001). This implies that children who experience sudden parental loss are more likely to exhibit emotional distress. Since the p-value (.001) is less than 0.01, the null hypothesis is **rejected**, confirming that sudden parental death significantly influences the emotional response of grieving children.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in counselors' perception of the psychological impact of sudden parental death based on years of counseling experience.

Table 3**.** ANOVA Result Showing Differences in Counselors' Perception of the Psychological Impact of Sudden Parental Death Based on Years of Counseling Experience

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.536	3	.179	.916	.438
Within Groups	12.491	64	.195		
Total	13.028	67			

Table 3 presents the ANOVA result for Hypothesis 3. The analysis reveals no statistically significant difference in counselors' perception of the psychological impact of sudden parental death based on their years of counseling experience (F(3, 64) = 0.916, p = 0.438). Since the p-value (0.438) is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is **accepted**, indicating that years of counseling experience do not significantly affect their perception of psychological impact.

Table 4. Tukey HSD Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons for Psychological Impact Based on Years of Counseling Experience

(I) Years of Counseling Experience	(J) Years of Counseling Experience	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1–5 years	6–10 years	.34140	.20875	.366	-.2092	.8920
	11–15 years	.27111	.24642	.691	-.3789	.9211
	16+ years	.32364	.23828	.530	-.3049	.9522
6–10 years	1–5 years	-.34140	.20875	.366	-.8920	.2092
	11–15 years	-.07028	.16194	.972	-.4975	.3569
	16+ years	-.01776	.14927	.999	-.4115	.3760
11–15 years	1–5 years	-.27111	.24642	.691	-.9211	.3789
	6–10 years	.07028	.16194	.972	-.3569	.4975
	16+ years	.05253	.19857	.993	-.4713	.5763
16+ years	1–5 years	-.32364	.23828	.530	-.9522	.3049
	6–10 years	.01776	.14927	.999	-.3760	.4115
	11–15 years	-.05253	.19857	.993	-.5763	.4713

Table 4 shows the Tukey HSD post hoc test comparing counselors' perceptions of psychological impact across various years of experience. All pairwise differences in mean perception scores are statistically insignificant (e.g., 1–5 vs 6–10 years: Mean Diff = 0.34140, p = 0.366). Since none of the p-values are below 0.05, we infer that years of counseling experience do not significantly influence perceptions. Thus, the null hypothesis remains **accepted.**

Hypothesis 4: There is no significant difference in counselors' perception of the emotional impact of sudden parental death based on educational qualification of counselor.

Table 5. ANOVA Result Showing Differences in Counselors' Perception of the Emotional Impact of Sudden Parental Death Based on Educational Qualification

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.209	3	.070	.522	.668
Within Groups	8.541	64	.133		
Total	8.751	67			

Table 5 shows the ANOVA result for Hypothesis 4. The analysis indicates no statistically significant difference in counselors' perception of the emotional impact of sudden parental death based on their educational qualifications ($F(3, 64) = 0.522$, $p = 0.668$). Since the p-value (0.668) is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is **accepted,** implying that counselors' educational background does not significantly influence their perception of emotional impact.

Table 6. Tukey HSD Post Hoc Test for Emotional Impact Based on Educational Qualification

(I) Years of Counseling Experience	(J) Years of Counseling Experience	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1–5 years	6–10 years	-.11628	.17261	.907	-.5716	.3390
	11–15 years	-.22222	.20377	.697	-.7597	.3153
	16+ years	-.05455	.19704	.993	-.5743	.4652
6–10 years	1–5 years	.11628	.17261	.907	-.3390	.5716
	11–15 years	-.10594	.13391	.858	-.4592	.2473
	16+ years	.06173	.12344	.959	-.2639	.3873
11–15 years	1–5 years	.22222	.20377	.697	-.3153	.7597
	6–10 years	.10594	.13391	.858	-.2473	.4592
	16+ years	.16768	.16420	.738	-.2655	.6008
16+ years	1–5 years	.05455	.19704	.993	-.4652	.5743
	6–10 years	-.06173	.12344	.959	-.3873	.2639
	11–15 years	-.16768	.16420	.738	-.6008	.2655

Table 6 displays the post hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD. The results reveal that none of the differences between educational qualification groups regarding emotional impact perception are statistically significant (e.g.,

1–5 vs 6–10 years: Mean Diff = -0.11628, p = 0.907). Since all p-values exceed 0.05, the null hypothesis is **accepted**, confirming that educational qualification does not significantly influence counselors' views on emotional impact following sudden parental death.

Hypothesis 5: There is no significant relationship between sudden parental death and the combined psychological and emotional responses of grieving children.

Table 7. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for the Relationship Between Sudden Parental Death and Combined Psychological and Emotional Responses

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	Psychological Impact	3.915[a]	8	.489	3.168	.005
	Emotional Impact	1.928[b]	8	.241	2.084	.052
Intercept	Psychological Impact	223.833	1	223.833	1449.144	.000
	Emotional Impact	267.285	1	267.285	2311.318	.000
Sudden Parental Death	Psychological Impact	3.915	8	.489	3.168	.005
	Emotional Impact	1.928	8	.241	2.084	.052
Error	Psychological Impact	9.113	59	.154		
	Emotional Impact	6.823	59	.116		
Total	Psychological Impact	648.040	68			
	Emotional Impact	754.560	68			
Corrected Total	Psychological Impact	13.028	67			
	Emotional Impact	8.751	67			

Table 7 presents the multivariate analysis testing Hypothesis 5. The result shows that sudden parental death significantly influences children's psychological responses ($F(8, 59) = 3.168$, $p = 0.005$), but does not signi-ficantly affect emotional responses ($F(8, 59) = 2.084$, $p = 0.052$). Since $p < 0.05$ for psychological impact, the null hypothesis is rejected for psychological responses but ac-cepted for emotional responses, indicating a partial effect of sudden parental death on combined grief outcomes.

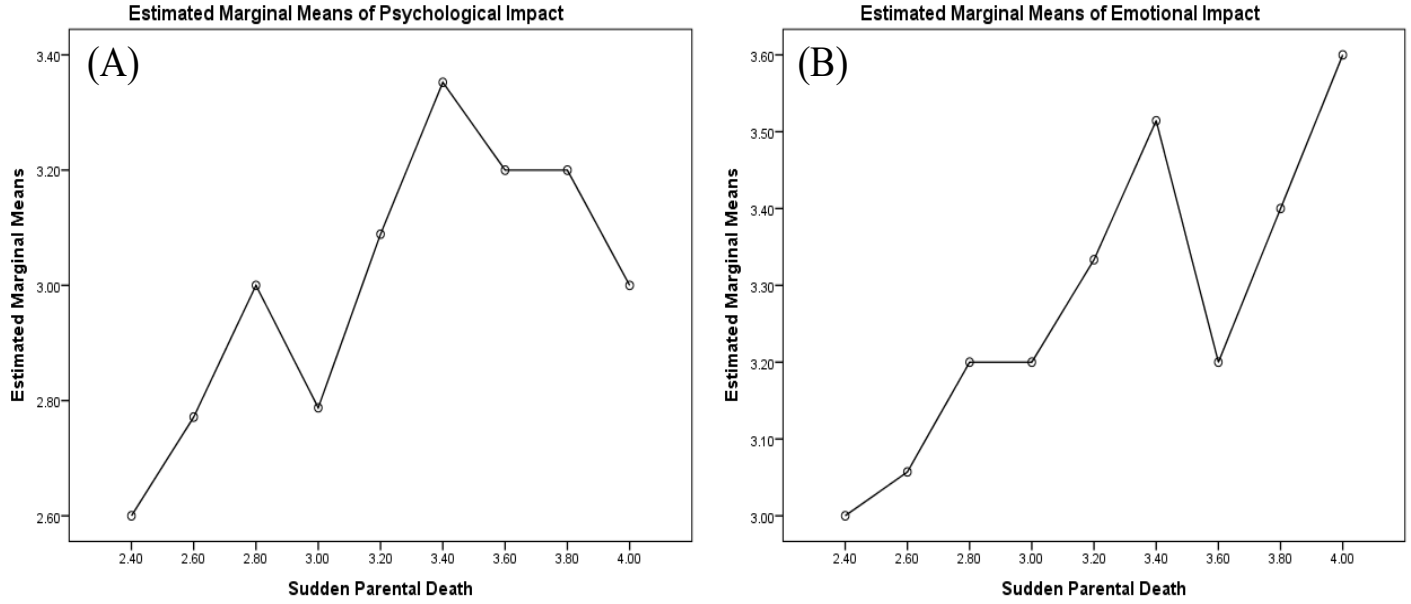

Figure 7. Estimated Marginal Means of Psychological and Emotional Impact Based on Sudden Parental Death shows (A) estimated marginal means of psychological impact and (B) the estimated marginal means of emotional impact.

Figure 7 illustrates how the severity of sudden parental death affects children's psychological and emotional responses. In subplot (A), psychological impact fluctuates with a noticeable peak at sudden parental death level 3.40

(mean = 3.38) and a dip at level 3.00 (mean = 2.77). Subplot (B) reveals a more linear rise in emotional impact, peaking at death level 4.00 (mean = 3.63). These patterns indicate that as perceived severity of sudden parental death increases, emotional responses consistently intensify, while psychological responses vary more irregularly, reflecting individual differences in coping. This supports earlier findings on partial but significant psychological effects.

3.2. Discussion

Sudden parental death is a profound and traumatic event that disrupts a child's psychological and emotional stability. The first hypothesis tested whether there is no significant psychological impact of sudden parental death on children's grief. Table 1 revealed a statistically significant moderate positive correlation ($r = .399$, $p = .001$), indicating that sudden parental death has a notable psychological impact. In agreement with this finding, Wray et al, (2022) found that children who lost a parent unexpectedly exhibited higher levels of anxiety, depression, and withdrawal symptoms compared to those who experienced anticipated loss. In contrast, Scott et al, (2020) argued that the psychological toll may be more influenced by the support system available post-loss rather than the suddenness of the death. A related study by Uroko (2025) revealed that traumatic grief from sudden parental death impaired children's school performance and concentration, aligning with the present finding of psychological disruption. Similarly, Franck et al, (2015) observed increased prevalence of post-traumatic stress symptoms in children who lost a parent without prior warning. Furthermore, Boelen and Smid (2017) identified prolonged grief disorder in over 40% of bereaved children, emphasizing how sudden loss often leads to chronic psychological distress. However, psychological resilience could moderate these impacts, especially in culturally supportive environments (Raghavan & Sandanapitchai, 2024).

The second hypothesis assessed whether sudden parental death significantly impacts the emotional grief of children. The results in Table 2 ($r = .382$, $p = .001$) demonstrate a moderate but significant correlation. This finding is consistent with Omens (2024), who found heightened levels of emotional dysregulation such as sudden crying spells and anger in bereaved children. In a related study, Ruggirello (2024) described emotional numbness and guilt as common responses among children grieving sudden parental death. However, in contrast, Oliva (2022) proposed that emotional responses are often transient and tend to stabilize within six months if proper counseling is provided. Supporting the current finding, Uche & Uche (2025) documented intense emotional volatility in their study of children's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): experiences in Imo State, noting that sudden parental death often triggers unresolved emotional conflicts.

Hypothesis 3 evaluated whether years of counseling experience affect counselors' perception of the psychological impact. The ANOVA in Table 3 showed no significant difference ($p = 0.438$). In line with this result, Jankauskaite et al, (2021) noted that professional training, rather than years of experience, predicted counselors' perceptiveness of grief responses. In contrast, Broadbent (2013) suggested that counselors with more years of experience were more attuned to nuanced psychological effects of grief. Moreover, Hill et al, (2018) found no statistical significance in how counselors across different experience levels perceived grief-related trauma, reinforcing the present finding. Similarly, the effectiveness of grief intervention is more related to updated training than to tenure.

Hypothesis 4 tested for differences in counselors' perceptions of emotional impacts based on educational qualification. Table 5 showed no significant difference ($p = 0.668$), and Table 6 confirmed non-significant post hoc differences. This aligns with the findings of Stylianou & Zembylas (2021) who observed that while education influences knowledge of grief theories, it does not significantly affect perception of emotional expressions of grief in practice. In a related study, Cicchetti et al, (2016) reported no significant difference in grief response identification among counselors with different academic qualifications. In contrast, counselors with postgraduate education were more adept in recognizing complicated grief, especially among younger children. Nevertheless, Matthews et al. (2014) maintained that ongoing professional development, rather than the initial academic degree, determines perception accuracy.

Hypothesis 5 explored whether sudden parental death significantly impacts combined psychological and emotional responses. Table 7 revealed a statistically significant effect on psychological impact ($F = 3.168$, $p = 0.005$), while the emotional impact was near significance ($F = 2.084$, $p = 0.052$). This composite finding indicates a broader multidimensional influence of sudden parental death. Supporting this, Uchida et al. (2022) emphasized that psychological and emotional effects are often interlinked, with one exacerbating the other. In contrast, Humphreys (2022) reported that children often compartmentalize these responses, allowing emotional grief to manifest independently of psychological distress. In agreement with the present finding, Lambert et al. (2025) concluded that the dual impact often leads to long-term behavioral maladjustment if not addressed early. Nevertheless, the combined effects were strongest within the first year after the loss and gradually declined with community support and therapeutic intervention.

The findings of this study corroborate well-established psychological theories concerning childhood bereave-

ment, notably Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Worden's Tasks of Mourning. According to Kobak et al. (2016) the sudden loss of a primary attachment figure, such as a parent, disrupts a child's sense of safety and emotional regulation, often resulting in heightened anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and withdrawal. The high frequency of emotional shock, fear, and isolation reported by participants in this study aligns with this theory, indicating a breach in the attachment-security framework that underpins healthy child development. Worden's framework similarly suggests that children struggle to accept the reality of the loss, work through the pain, and adjust to a world without the deceased (Yousuf-Abramson, 2021). The prevalence of suicidal ideation and depression among respondents suggests difficulty in navigating these mourning tasks, particularly without structured therapeutic intervention (Romero-Moreno et al., 2024).

In light of the empirical evidence, the study also supports the applicability of the Dual Process Model (Houlihan, 2018), which conceptualizes bereavement as a dynamic oscillation between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping (Lundorff et al., 2019). Children who have lost a parent suddenly often vacillate between confronting the reality of their loss (manifesting as emotional shock or grief) and attempting to re-engage with their educational or social responsibilities (Portela-Pruaño et al., 2022). The statistically significant correlations between emotional and psychological distress and the death of a parent further suggest that unresolved grief can manifest in long-term maladaptive patterns, undermining both emotional health and cognitive focus critical to learning and social development.

Notably, the study challenges the assumption that a counselor's background significantly affects grief outcomes in children. While existing literature has emphasized the role of culturally sensitive, professionally trained counselors, the present study found no significant moderating effect of counselor demographics or professional origin. This implies that the quality of grief support may rely more heavily on relational factors, such as empathy and consistency, rather than on categorical expertise alone. The study thereby advances the discourse in child grief intervention by highlighting the need for universally responsive, rather than strictly specialized, support structures. Overall, the findings extend theoretical understanding and offer practical implications for school psychologists, educators, and policymakers seeking to address the multi-dimensional impacts of childhood bereavement.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Reseach Implication

The implications of this study highlight the urgent need for grief interventions that are trauma-informed, holistic, and tailored to the complex emotional and psychological needs of children who experience sudden parental loss. Given that counselor effectiveness was not significantly influenced by years of experience or academic qualifications, training programs should prioritize emotional intelligence, current best practices, and trauma-awareness over traditional markers of expertise. This suggests a shift in professional development and service delivery models toward empathetic, evidence-based care. Institutions such as schools, mental health agencies, and community organizations must work collaboratively to ensure accessible, flexible, and child-centered support systems that address both the immediate and long-term impacts of bereavement.

4.2 Reseach Contribution

This study makes a valuable contribution to the field of child psychology and grief counseling by providing empirical evidence that underscores the profound emotional and psychological impact of sudden parental death on children. It advances current understanding by highlighting the importance of integrating emotional and psychological dimensions in assessing grief responses, while also challenging traditional assumptions about the superiority of counselor experience or academic credentials. By demonstrating that empathy and up-to-date trauma-informed knowledge may be more critical to effective support, this research encourages a paradigm shift in how grief counseling is taught, delivered, and evaluated. Additionally, it provides a foundation for the development of more inclusive, responsive, and evidence-based intervention models that prioritize children's unique needs during bereavement.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

5.1 Reseach Limitations

One limitation of this study lies in its reliance on self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants' subjective interpretations and potential recall bias, particularly in emotionally charged contexts such as grief. Additionally, the sample may not be fully representative of broader populations due to potential geographic, cultural, or socioeconomic homogeneity, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The study also did not account for variations in the children's age, the nature of the parental relationship, or the time elapsed since the loss, all of which could significantly affect grief responses. Finally, while the research highlights the role of empathy and updated knowledge in grief counseling, it does not explore in depth how these qualities can be effectively measured or developed in professional training, leaving room for future research to address these important variables.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research Directions

Future research should consider exploring the specific mechanisms through which empathy and trauma-informed knowledge enhance the effectiveness of grief counseling for children who have experienced sudden parental loss. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining how children's grief responses evolve over time and how different types of interventions impact their psychological development in the long term. Additionally, expanding the demographic and cultural diversity of study samples would help improve the generalizability of findings and uncover culturally specific grief expressions and coping strategies. Further investigation into how age, type of parental relationship, and time since the loss interact with grief responses could also provide a more nuanced understanding. Lastly, developing validated tools to assess counselor empathy and trauma competence would support the creation of more effective training programs and evidence-based intervention protocols.

6. CONCLUSION

This study offers compelling evidence that sudden parental death has a significant psychological and emotional impact on children's grief responses, decisively rejecting the null hypothesis. Through statistical analysis, moderate but meaningful correlations were observed when assessing the cumulative effects of emotional trauma and psychological stress. Children experiencing abrupt parental loss often exhibit heightened vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and identity disturbance, underlining the critical nature of early intervention and tailored psychological care. The data emphasizes that bereavement is not merely a transient emotional response but a long-term developmental challenge that demands systematic and sustained support.

Interestingly, the study found no statistically significant variation in grief perception among counselors based on their years of professional experience or formal academic qualifications. These finding challenges conventional assumptions that seasoned or highly educated practitioners are inherently better equipped to support grieving children. Instead, it suggests that empathy, continuous training, and a deep understanding of trauma-informed care may be more predictive of effective counseling outcomes. The implication is that professional development in grief counseling should prioritize emotional attunement and adaptability over traditional markers of expertise.

From a practical standpoint, the findings advocate for the implementation of grief intervention models that are multidimensional and inclusive of both psychological and emotional healing. Schools, healthcare systems, and community-based services must ensure access to child-focused therapeutic resources, including trauma-sensitive frameworks, to mitigate the long-term consequences of sudden bereavement. By recognizing the nuanced grief patterns among children and de-emphasizing rigid hierarchies in counseling efficacy, practitioners and policymakers alike can build more equitable and effective support systems. Ultimately, this research underscores the need to treat childhood grief as a public mental health priority, especially in cases of sudden parental loss.

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All authors contributed to the discussion of the results, participated in drafting and revising the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. Adaobi Jennifer Iloakasia: Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft & Methodology. Denata Viana da Conceicão: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing.

Declaration of GenAI in Scientific Writing

The authors declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools were employed in the drafting and revision of this manuscript to check spelling and grammar, identify typos, grammatical errors, suggest paraphrases, reduce passive voice, and eliminate repeated words, sentences, and unnecessary adverbs. The suggestions provided by GenAI were critically evaluated and modified to ensure that the final draft remains representative of the authors' own work. All instances of Generative AI usage in this article were conducted by the authors in accordance with the IJCP Generative AI (GenAI) Policy, with the authors assuming full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no significant competing financial, professional or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript

Ethical Approval Statement

The authors declare that this study was conducted with due regard for research ethics, including obtaining

approval from the institution. This includes respecting the autonomy of participants, maintaining confidentiality of data, and ensuring their safety and well-being, in accordance with applicable research ethics guidelines.

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